

Southern Illinois University Carbondale's Center for Rural Health and Social Service Development is a resource center serving the southern Illinois region to strengthen the rural health infrastructure and promote opportunities to enhance the health of residents. We do this primarily by providing technical assistance to area health care and social service providers, developing and evaluating pilot projects, facilitating provider training opportunities, identifying grant opportunities, and conducting relevant research.

Widespread broadband deployment is critical to several issues relevant to healthcare reform implementation. Besides Electronic Health Record adoption and Health Information Exchange utilization, implementation of innovative telemedicine applications requires high speed connections. Projects such as the Caring Connections Coalition, a tele-psychiatry pilot project funded by Office of Rural Health Policy and lead by Shawnee Health Services would not be feasible without the capability of real-time interaction. This pilot project connects child and adolescent psychiatry services to the Special Education District in Williamson County via video conferencing--allowing medication consultation to take place in parallel to behavioral modification planning for student participants and their families. This project addressed the shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists in southern Illinois by expanding access to care via a replicable telehealth model. Evaluating and disseminating the results of successful innovative solutions like this is vital to integration and adoption of similar programs in regions throughout the state.

Specialty care is not the only area facing shortages--a key to successful health care reform is addressing the impending shortage of primary health care providers, especially in rural areas where deficiencies already exist. Thus, recruitment and retention of providers is a puzzle piece critical to health care access in rural areas. By introducing our area youth to possible health careers at an early age, we are engaging those most likely to remain here or come back to a rural area to practice medicine. We are integrating health career exposure into our successful school-based health programming to increase awareness and education around various health care careers available right here in southern Illinois in hopes that our best and brightest will choose a successful, recession-proof career benefiting their own community. This health care career track experience is a step in the right direction.

Access to care is also affected by the patient's ability to physically get to available health care. Because health care is available in a region, does not always mean that a patient, especially a rural patient can access it. The CRHSSD has been identifying and analyzing issues surrounding rural medical transportation gaps for over four years. The Rural Medical Transportation Network is made up of EMS providers, mass transit providers and health care providers in the southern 34 counties of Illinois. Their collaborative problem solving has made great strides in filling identified transportation gaps for rural medical patients. But, an increase in Medicaid-based payments coupled with the continued influx of behavioral health issues will most likely increase the burden and abuse of our rural transportation systems in a profound way. Therefore, more work is needed and solutions cannot be realized without policy and legislative action. Our rural medical transportation system is fragmented and needs a closer look from various state agency views. Only then, can further progress toward access be made, especially for our most vulnerable populations.

When finding innovative, workable solutions to complex issues, such as health care reform implementation, we have found a critical component is collaboration. Developing networks, partnerships and working groups to address problems from a regional perspective allows organizations to leverage the strengths of others and fulfills a more comprehensive solution that can be shared successfully across various regions. We are much stronger as a network, taking diverse viewpoints into consideration while working toward a common goal than each going it alone. We have had to learn this lesson from necessity in our rural area, we want to pass the message on statewide.

Thank you.